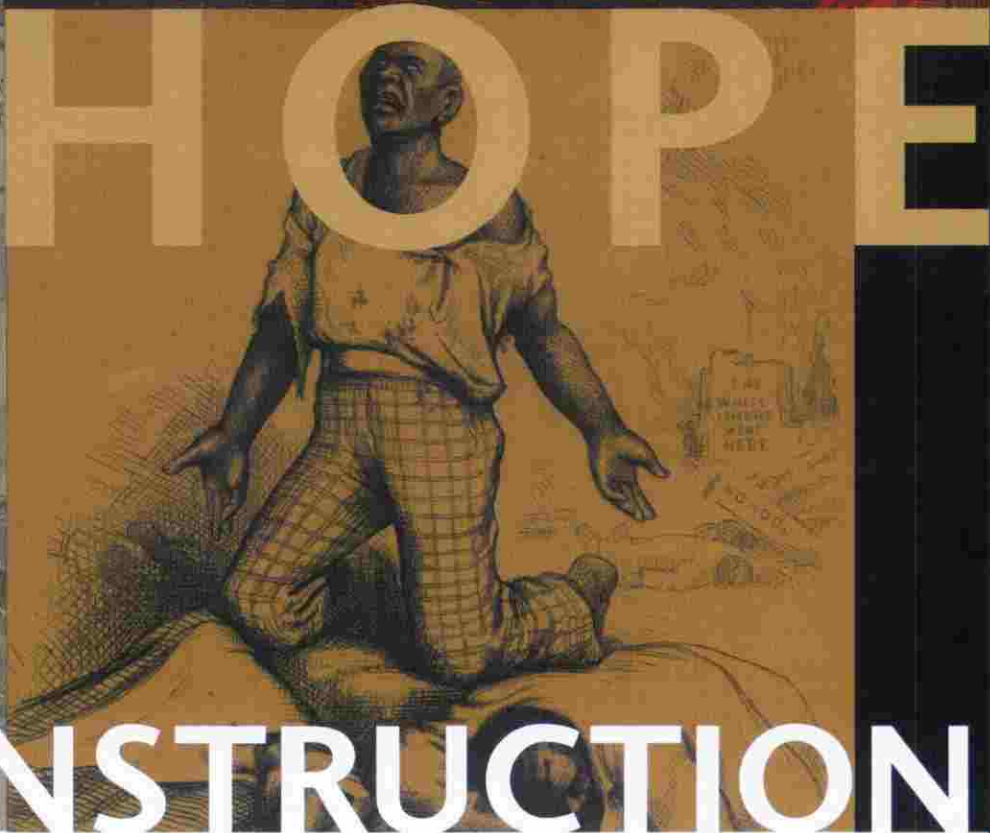
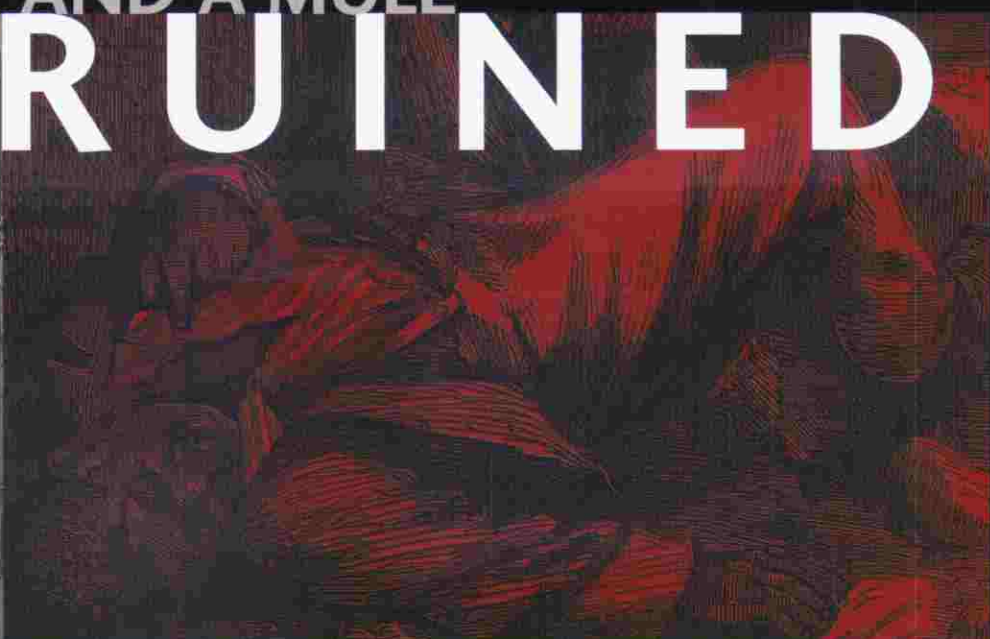
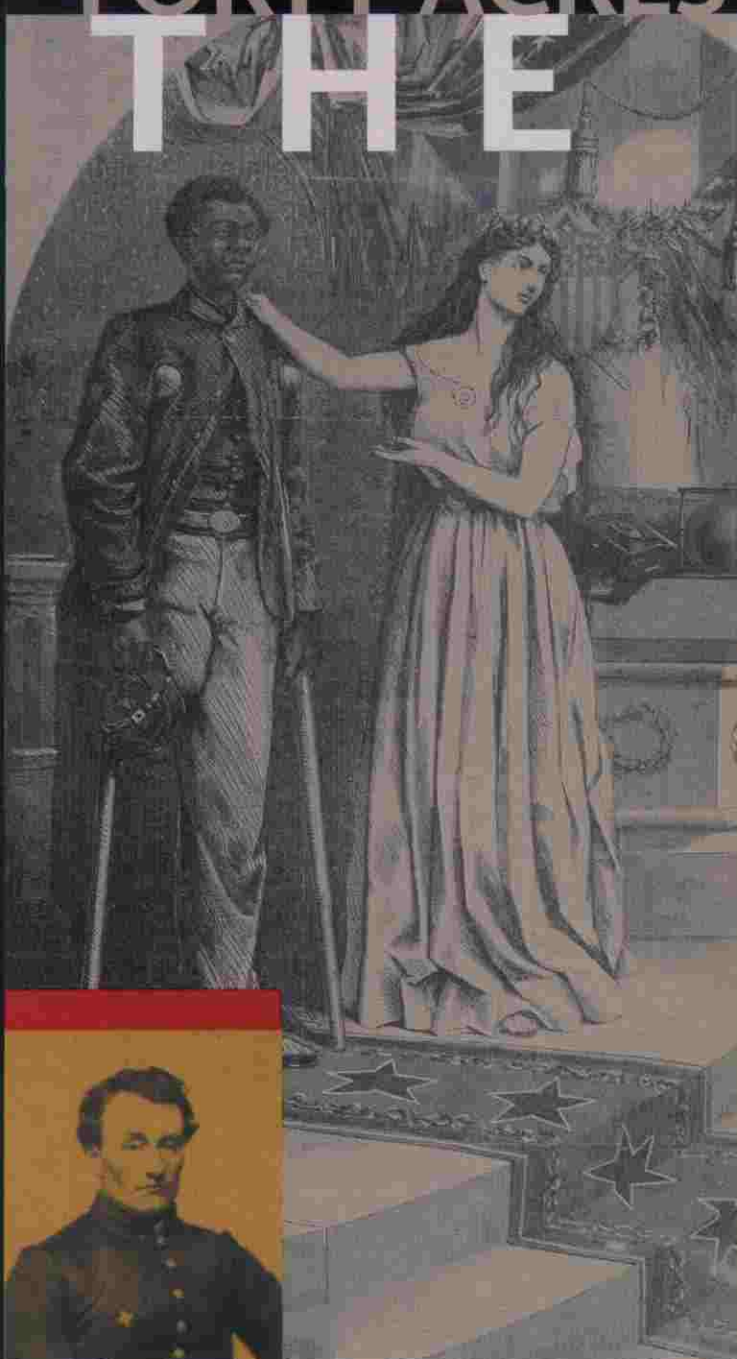


FORTY ACRES AND A MULE

THE RUINED



OF RECONSTRUCTION

BY DANIELLE ALEXANDER

The figure of Columbia; upper left clockwise, with a disenfranchised black veteran; a victim of violence against black Republicans during the 1868 presidential election; a black man pleading for equal protection with his community destroyed behind him; Union officer and plantation owner Marshall Twitchell.

—Thomas Nast for *HARPER'S WEEKLY*, August 5, 1865/Library of Congress; Thomas Nast for *HARPER'S WEEKLY*, August 8, 1868/Library of Congress; Thomas Nast for *HARPER'S WEEKLY*, September 2, 1876/courtesy of Harvard College Library; courtesy of Mrs. Mary Twitchell

“RECONSTRUCTION WAS A FAILURE, BUT A splendid failure,” says historian Leon Litwack. An NEH-supported documentary provides a new examination of the twelve years that followed the Civil War, when America struggled to reunite and to extend rights to former slaves. It was a time that saw new hope for Southern blacks as citizens and officeholders and sweeping changes in laws and government. But it was also a time of violence and terror, white racist retrenchment, and broken promises. In the end, the goal of Reconstruction—equality before the law for black citizens—would not be fulfilled until the next century.

"It didn't fail for the reasons people expected it would fail," Litwack contends. "It failed because Radical Reconstruction tested the limits of what was possible, the limits for egalitarian reform in the United States. The challenge of racial equality overwhelmed the American imagination."

The film describes the period through the people who lived through it, among them a black minister from New Jersey who begins his own experiment in democracy in Georgia; an actress's daughter who tries to run a rice plantation without slaves; and a Vermont soldier who finds both wealth and ruin in Louisiana. *Reconstruction: The Second Civil War*, produced by PBS affiliate WGBH-Boston, will air on the *American Experience* on January 12 and 13.

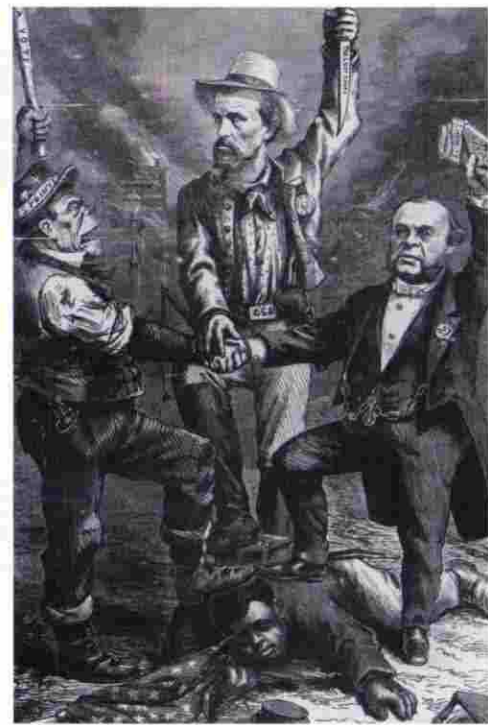
Reconstruction began before the war ended. A few weeks after Union General William T. Sherman concluded his march to the sea in Savannah, he met with twenty black men, including the Reverend Garrison Frazier, to discuss how to deal with tens of thousands of freed blacks who had left inland plantations and followed Sherman's forces to the coast. Frazier was asked, "What should we do with all these refugees?" He replied that the "best way we can take care of ourselves is to have land." Sherman responded with Special Field Order 15 to deliver "forty acres and a mule" to each freed slave.

The order gave abandoned plantations on the barrier islands of South Carolina and Georgia to freed blacks; forty thousand resettled there. One of the new settlers was Tunis Campbell, an African Methodist Episcopal minister from New Jersey, who became superintendent of the Georgia islands for the Freedman's Bureau, which was coordinating a national relief program for refugees. Campbell took it one step further. Under Campbell, St. Catherines Island became a separatist democracy for four hundred blacks with its own constitution, congress, supreme court, and armed militia. They planted food crops and started schools.

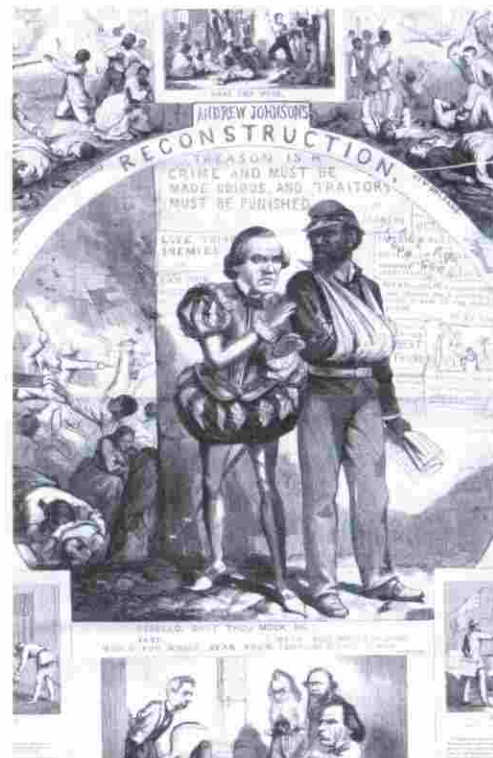
With the assassination of Lincoln at the end of the war, the experiment on St. Catherines ended. Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson, ordered the confiscated lands returned to their former owners. "Johnson's aim," historian Eric Foner points out in the film, "is to bring the white South and the white North back together. African Americans just do not play a role in Johnson's vision of the postwar South, other than to go back to work and be landless ... and rightless ... plantation laborers."

The federal government forced the residents off the islands, and the former owners reclaimed the plantations. The promise of land was lost. Most blacks had no alternative except to work for the returning plantation land owners. For the chance to put in his own crops, a black farmer would work twenty or more acres of cotton or rice for the owner. The system of sharecropping was born. Campbell bought land inland and became the workers' advocate.

His activities brought him into conflict with Fan Butler, whose family had owned a rice plantation in Georgia for generations. Her mother, actress Fanny Kemble, had returned to England years before to show her disgust with the slave culture in America. Fan Butler returned after the war with her father, and was struggling to keep her plantation afloat. Campbell advised Butler's workers to resist exploitation, infuriating Butler. "There seems to be no remedy for this evil," she said, "the Negroes throwing all our authority to the wind, and following Campbell wherever he chose to lead them." Butler lodged a complaint



"This Is a White Man's Government" represents the different wings of the Democratic Party: a Catholic-Irish American with the Colored Orphan Asylum burning behind him as a symbol of the draft riots in New York City, Confederate general Nathan Bedford Forrest carrying a dagger of the Lost Cause, and August Belmont of the wealthy New York elite holding a packet of money.



Nast parodies Shakespeare, casting President Andrew Johnson as Iago and a black Union veteran as Othello in "Reconstruction and How It Works." Following the race riots in Memphis and New Orleans (upper panels), a rumble began to remove Johnson. Within two years, he would be impeached for "high crimes and misdemeanors."

against Campbell for fostering rebellion—it would be the first of many suits against him.

Butler was frustrated by having to negotiate with people she had considered property a short time earlier. “For six mortal hours I sat in the office without once leaving my chair,” Butler wrote, “while the people poured in and poured out.... One wanted this altered in the contract, another that.”

Butler’s attitude was not atypical. “Neither she nor the other members of her class know how to handle free labor,” says historian Clarence Walker. “What they want is a docile, disciplined labor force.”

Campbell had other ideas. In the words of historian Russell Duncan, “He often stood behind the pulpits in black churches on Sunday and said, ‘Under the new acts of Congress, we’re going to be allowed to vote. You’re going to be protected in that vote. We have a great majority in this district. We are going to elect black judges. We are going to elect black sheriffs. We are going to elect black senators.’”

In Louisiana, at the state convention in New Orleans in 1866, a white mob attacked Republicans and their black supporters. Thirty-four blacks and three white Republicans were killed before federal troops restored order. The riot made headlines in the North and South and turned the midterm elections into a referendum on President Johnson’s policies. His opponents, the Republicans, took three quarters of the seats in both houses of Congress, enough to override any veto Johnson might attempt and to pave the way for the Reconstruction Act of 1867, initiating the period known as Radical Reconstruction.

Under the new act, to be readmitted to the Union the rebel states had to register all qualified voters, create new state constitutions, and ratify the recently passed Fourteenth Amendment, guaranteeing black citizenship.

“For all its significance, it’s important to remember what the Fourteenth Amendment did not do,” says historian Brooks Simpson. “It did not enfranchise blacks. It did not prevent Southern whites from maintaining racial superiority. Frederick Douglass was one of the many critics of the amendment who failed to see how American citizenship could be guaranteed without the right to vote.”

Radical Reconstruction attempted to protect black suffrage in the South with the deployment of thirty-eight thousand federal troops. They oversaw the 1868 presidential election, which brought the Civil War hero Ulysses S. Grant, a moderate, to the White House. Five hundred thousand blacks voted, presumably for the Republican Party. Grant won by only three hundred thousand.

According to Foner, this time was “a remarkable leap in the dark for world history. It was the first large-scale experiment in interracial democracy that had existed anywhere.” Throughout the South, black candidates were elected to state and federal posts. One quarter of the delegates responsible for drafting the new state constitutions were black. Altogether, more than fifteen hundred black men would hold elected positions during this period.

One was Campbell, who served in the Georgia state senate from 1868 to 1872, until he lost his seat on charges of election fraud. “The presence of black officeholders and their white allies,” Foner points out, “made a real difference in Southern life, ensuring those accused of crimes would be tried before their peers, and enforcing fairness in such prosaic aspects of local government as road repair, tax assessment, and poor relief.”

There were other benefits. Free public education, for both blacks and whites, was brought to a region where less than a decade earlier it had been illegal to educate a slave. The Freedmen’s Bureau established more than 4,300 freedmen’s schools by 1870, with nearly a quarter of a million students.

“Black voting carried with it an enormous meaning,” says Walker. “It meant that political power was going to be shared between blacks and whites. This is a very frightening thing for many white Southerners because they have, in effect, lost control over what they had deemed their birthright, which is the right to run these governments.”

Whites responded with campaigns of organized terror. Secret societies such as the Ku Klux Klan and the White League flourished. “They basically began to forge the Confederate Lost Cause as not a story about loss but a story about victory,” says Blight. “They might have lost the war, but they were now winning the ultimate victory ... against Reconstruction.”

One of the Klan’s targets was black state representative Abram Colby, who had been elected to the Georgia legislature along with Tunis Campbell. In October of 1869, after failing to buy his acquiescence, the Klan kidnapped Colby and whipped him. Colby later testified, “They said to me, ‘Do you think you will ever vote another damned radical ticket?’ I said, ‘If there was an election tomorrow, I would vote the radical ticket.’ They set in and whipped me a thousand licks more.”

The Georgia legislature was often a tense scene. When black representatives spoke, according to Duncan, many white legislators “put their hands on the butts of the pistols they wore into the chamber. They shuffled their feet. They banged on the desk. They talked about the ‘Congo senator’s insolent harangue.’” Within two months the legislature voted to expel its thirty-two black members. “You may drive us out, but you will light a torch never to be put out,” Campbell swore, and headed to Washington to lodge a protest.

In the North, a majority of states still did not allow blacks the vote and showed no inclination to change. The solution from Congress was the Fifteenth Amendment, which was ratified in 1870.

By 1871 incidents of Klan violence had become so common that congressional hearings on the problem were convened. In the U.S. Senate it was reported that fifty thousand murders had been committed in the South since the war. “This was a war of terror,” says Blight. “The Ku Klux Klan ... is an original American terrorist organization.” Congress passed the Ku Klux Klan Act in 1871, suspending habeas corpus in nine counties in South Carolina and leading to the arrest of hundreds on charges of conspiracy to deny rights to blacks. The trials wiped out the Klan in South Carolina and helped Grant’s popularity in the North.

However, violence continued elsewhere towards those that supported Reconstruction. In Louisiana, it was directed at a Northern interloper. Marshall Twitchell, a former Union soldier from Vermont, had gone to northern Louisiana immediately after the war and become a prosperous planter. He married a young local woman, twenty-year-old Adele Coleman, and acquired a 420-acre cotton plantation. The Coleman family helped him learn the cotton business.

Twitchell was resented by many in his Louisiana parish as a carpetbagger. The term, says Twitchell’s biographer Ted Tunnell, was coined by conservative papers to describe “a

lowlife Yankee. He packs his scanty belongings in a carpet bag and takes the first steamship south, to profit upon the misery of a defeated people."

That impression is wrong, says Foner. "In fact, most carpetbaggers tended to be well-educated and middle class in origin. The majority were veterans of the Union Army, and their ranks also included teachers, Freedmen's Bureau agents, and men who had invested tens of thousands of dollars in cotton plantations."

As an administrator for the Freedmen's Bureau, Twitchell appointed blacks to local government and placed his three brothers-in-law in choice local posts: sheriff, tax assessor, and clerk of court. Twitchell ran for the state senate in 1870, and with black enfranchisement won handily. One of his neighbors, B.W. Marston, said of Twitchell, "I consider him a tyrant."

"This is the most violent place in Louisiana and probably the most violent place in the South," says Tunnell. While Twitchell was in New Orleans for the Republican state convention, his brother and three brothers-in-law, along with twenty blacks, were threatened by the White League and shot in the back as they were trying to leave Louisiana.

No one was brought to trial for his family's murder. Twitchell moved away from the parish, but his neighbors' memories were long. Two years later, when Twitchell returned to Coushatta on business, a disguised assassin believed to be his old rival Marston approached Twitchell's ferry as he arrived. In broad daylight, the gunman shot Twitchell repeatedly; he escaped by feigning death and floating face-down in the water. Twitchell survived but lost both his arms; he fled with his remaining family back north. Tunnell says Twitchell's "real crime was that he made Radical Reconstruction work at the parish level in Louisiana."

All over the South, proponents of Reconstruction were losing ground. In Georgia, Tunis Campbell was defending himself against his accusers: "Just before every election they commence to intimidate by arresting all the prominent colored men. As usual they have arrested me again."

"Democrats are relentless in their efforts to depose him," says Duncan. "He's too famous to kill. . . . They're afraid of what might happen in the local community. So they keep him involved in a myriad of lawsuits, charging him with abusing his office." The charge was commonly to "give the Negro supremacy over the white man." The entire black community of Darien, Georgia, would turn out to protest Campbell's trials. One witness said that if they put him in jail his supporters "would have put that jail in the river." Eventually, one of the charges caught up with him. In 1875, Campbell was indicted for falsely imprisoning white men and sentenced to a year on a chain gang.

For Campbell and others, times were changing. After he was released, Campbell returned North for good. Twitchell was appointed the U.S. consul at Kingston, Canada. Fan Butler, broke and disheartened, gave up planting and departed for England with her British husband.

The nation had lost the political will to support Reconstruction. A depressed economy had made the North weary of the South's problems. Many saw the federal government abusing its power. When Grant sent federal troops marching into the Louisiana statehouse in 1874 to throw out the White League and restore the Republican government, it alarmed everyone. "If this can be done in



A costume design for the Comus Mardi Gras Ball in New Orleans, 1873: Darwin's missing link as part carpetbagger and part fox. "It conjures up the image of a lowlife Yankee. He packs his scanty belongings in a carpetbag and takes the first steamship south, to profit upon the misery of a defeated people."—historian Ted Tunnell

Louisiana," said a senator, "how long before it can be done in Massachusetts and in Ohio?"

In 1877, the Presidential election was so close it went to the House of Representatives for a decision. Reconstruction became a bargaining chip: in exchange for the Democrats' agreement to accept Rutherford B. Hayes in the White House, the Reconstruction Act of 1867 would be rescinded and federal troops withdrawn from the South. The deal was struck. Without the military to enforce racial equality, the era of Reconstruction was over. □

Danielle Alexander is a writer in Denver, Colorado.

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